**How did the Second World War Impact the Welsh Nation?**

As an English born student living in Wales, the sense of national pride I have observed can be palpable. Most commonly evoked at sporting events or annual *eisteddfod*, I was struck by the proud and patriotic fervour that accompanied the centenary of the First World War. Lloyd George issued his famous call to arms for a Welsh army in 1914 and the recent books, documentaries and memorials show that this appreciation of a specific Welsh contribution has not diminished over time. Curiously, however, I have not observed the same emotional sense of Welshness among commemorations of the Second World War, with the recent VE Day 75th anniversary celebrated with the overtly British symbols of the Union Flag and Churchill. Did the war impact the Welsh in a manner they are less inclined to celebrate? Or did their shared sense of British community supersede nationalistic interests? Whatever the reasons, this lessened plurality warrants investigation in order to better understand both the impact of the Second World War and the psyche of the modern Welsh nation.

It is worth noting that the Welsh shared their wartime experiences with a majority of the United Kingdom and were very much incorporated into a shared sense of solidarity. By September 1939 the outbreak of war had seemed largely inevitable and thus was met with unexpected relief throughout Britain, albeit without the euphoria and celebration with which the First World War had been met in 1914. This earlier conflict had scared all nations of the United Kingdom without discrimination and while they were loathed to become embroiled in another devastating war, they had witnessed the failure of appeasement so embraced the news with a sense of British duty irrespective of where they lived. Of course some individuals, such as Welshman Harry Highman found the prospect exhilarating, but these feelings were by no means exclusive to the Welsh. Equally the recollection of children in Aberystwyth playing trenches and liking their gas masks, albeit not the ‘Mickey Mouse’ design, could well be imagined in any region of the United Kingdom where such equipment was distributed uniformly. Similarly, rationed food, ARP precautions, propaganda and other defining experiences of the wartime years brought a commonality across the whole country. The suffering and heroism of ordinary people on the Home Front also became quintessentially British during the early years of the war, as German bombers selected targets based on strategic importance regardless of their host nation. Though recollections highlighted by that of Joan Williams, who describes huddling in an Anderson Shelter on Townhill as bombs killed nearby residents of Gwynedd Avenue, and her father putting out incendiary bombs with sand, are highly emotive, they are again not exclusive. Joan would have been well aware that she was experiencing the same fears as those in London, creating resounding British solidarity. Equally when Lloyd witnessed a fire engine with a chain of men passing water being killed by a direct hit, he would have been aware of similar scenes in the Coventry Blitz only three months earlier. It would be naïve to believe that all experiences were of trauma, as bombing raids over Wales decreased after 1941, uniting these cities in optimism and relief with English cities whose troubles simultaneously alleviated. In the workplace, many Welsh miners redistributed to coalfields such as Kent while ‘Bevin Boys’ were sent to Wales, having a coalescent effect on workers who bonded into an identity of ‘Britishness’. This united character of wartime Britain could well explain the uncharacteristically British commemorations held in Wales to this day.

The Welsh servicemen who entered the theatre of war seem to broadly reflect this sentiment. Welsh affiliated regiments such as The Royal Welch Fusiliers tenaciously continued their traditions abroad, including eating leeks and fighting wearing leeks on St David’s Day, singing Welsh hymns and playing a ‘Wales vs the rest’ soccer match in which a Sergeant-major chased his opposition with a giant leek. However it would be incorrect to mistake regimental traditions for Welsh exclusivity. By the Second World War the concept of a true Welsh Division as had fought in 1916 was replaced by a more fluid posting of personnel before 1940, when up to 40% of a ‘Welsh’ unit could be drawn from outside Wales and Welsh soldiers could go to England. Some individuals such as former captain Wyn Griffith publicly expressed disappointment that Welshmen could not fight together in units, however a majority of soldiers appear to have responded positively to this amalgamation into a more mixed British army. The ramifications of the war upon these men were no different to any other British soldier. Welsh losses of 15,000, a terrible figure, it must be conceded are fewer than the 40,000 Welshmen killed in the First World War and proportionate to the losses of other British nations. This difference in the sheer scale of loss could potentially contribute to the more resounding and explicitly Welsh commemorations for the earlier war only, with a more British memory of the second. It is equally valid to note that the Welsh soldiers of the Second World War did not fight a focal battle upon which national commemorations could be concentrated, differing greatly to the likes of Mametz Wood which became ingrained into Welsh consciousness twenty years prior. While this does not diminish Welsh heroics in Reusel in 1944, where Royal Welch soldiers rushed to the grimmest fighting of all and overcame two enemy platoons by use of the Welsh language to avoid German comprehension, the Second World War ultimately made Welsh soldiers share in a collective victory.

Despite this undeniable sensation of shared Britishness and camaraderie that was fostered by the Second World War, there was nevertheless underlying this a growing sense of national pride in Wales which flourished by 1945. The Welsh self-perception of their role in facilitating a successful British evacuation from urban to rural areas perhaps best encapsulates this view, as much of Wales was a designated reception area for evacuees. Indeed, although bombing of British cities fortunately never reached the scale many had feared in 1939, 110,000 children were evacuated to Wales, including those from Welsh cities, with 33,000 arriving in Glamorgan. As evacuation had begun following the Munich Crisis, 20,000 evacuees reached Wales on September 1st alone two days prior to the declaration of war. For many evacuees from deprived inner city areas, 20% of whom had been recorded as malnourished during the 1930’s Great Depression, life in rural Wales improved their wellbeing. Fresh, comparably abundant farm produce and a more nurturing community spirit combined with the appeal of the countryside to persuade some to even remain in their host village after the war. Many Welsh families reflected proudly on what they had done for their evacuees, going beyond care to reform their guests’ misbehaviour. This attitude is typified by local newspapers, with one describing evacuation as ‘Welsh hospitality at its best’ relaying how boys leaving Carmarthen for home had shouted ‘*Cymru am Byth’*, *Wales forever*, from the window. The Welsh certainly served British interests, but did so with immense pride in the role Wales played. Far from merely valuing themselves, the rural Welsh felt valued and appreciated by British government gestures such as their decision to broadcast on the radio in the Welsh language.

Although urban centres in Wales faced the same threat of German bombers that English cities had to endure, their national pride was no less elevated by the events of the Second World War than those in the countryside. During the ‘Three Nights Blitz’ of Swansea on 19-21st February 1941, one woman defiantly remarked that her husband ‘is in the army, the coward’. Such was the ferocity of the raids that 1,273 explosive and 56,000 incendiary bombs were dropped, destroying 7000 homes, cutting off power and fracturing the sewers. Yet a relatively low number of people were killed at 230, comparing favourably with almost 1000 killed in Belfast. The residents of Swansea had prepared very thoroughly for the possibility of raids and their subsequent success became a source of great pride in the city and surrounding areas of Wales. As early as 1937 the Swansea Council anticipated an aerial bombardment. They knew its port and docks were vital to the import and export of coal the whole country would depend on in wartime. Thus their police and fire service received anti-gas training, the town established an ARP department with wardens and first aid points by 1938, built 500 communal shelters and distributed 6,549 Anderson shelters by March 1939. These precautions proved prudent as Swansea actually faced a bombing raid before London, the city and its people being highlighted in British newspapers for their exemplary resilience. Perhaps most importantly, the people had pulled together as a community, setting up public feeding stations and fresh water tank lorriesor receiving shelter with strangers in the Gower as a strong Welsh community spirit developed. Only 30% of urban residents spoke Welsh in the 1930s and they did not share the esteem of hosting evacuees, however their national pride was manifest. On VE day they sang *Hen Wlad fy Nhaddau* as well as *God save the Queen* and flew the Red Dragon as well as the Union Jack, a symbolic representation of the Welsh attitude towards their nation within the wider war effort.

That being said, just as not everybody in Wales was impacted by war in the same way, equally not everybody can be said to have reacted in the same way either. In fact the opposition of some became intertwined with Welsh nationalism and fuelled the desire for devolution. Wales was a notably religious nation at the time of the war, having undergone a Christian revival in the early 1900s with a distinctly Welsh preference towards nonconformist chapels. These chapels, outnumbering churches 5 to 2, became linked with the Peace Pledge Union and thus generally opposed the war, advocating a negotiated peace instead. Although they did not represent a majority of the Welsh population, devout Welsh Christians found it difficult to reconcile their peaceful hopes with Westminster’s, and thus England’s, perceived decision to fight. Such religious opponents included the controversial John Cledan Mears, who later became the Bishop of Bangor serving the Church in Wales, itself a popular symbol of disestablishment from the Church of England following the 1914 Welsh Church Act. In this manner wartime differences accelerated some Welsh people’s awareness of cultural plurality rather than British unity.

There were others who actively pursued and attempted to disseminate this notion. *Plaid Cymru* had only recently been founded in 1925 and with 2000 members did not represent the views of a majority in Wales, nevertheless this party opposed the Second World War on nationalistic grounds to successfully plant the seed of devolution and nationalism into Welsh consciousness. For example, overwhelmingly Welsh speaking areas typically taught their evacuees Welsh, but polyglot areas became tipped towards the English language by the arrival of evacuees. Plaid’s Saunders Lewis passionately denounced this as ‘one of the most horrible threats to the continuation and to the life of the Welsh nation that has ever been suggested in history’. Megan Lloyd George, a liberal politician who campaigned for a Welsh Parliament, spoke at the Anglesey Eisteddfod and compared the Welsh in the war to heroes Glyndŵr and Llywelyn. It cannot be ignored that her chosen figures fought for Welsh independence against the English rather than representing British camaraderie. Authorities appear to have contributed to antagonising these nationalists, as although the British government recognised Welsh nationalism as valid ground for conscientious objection, all of the two dozen nationalist objectors were either imprisoned or fined. MI5 monitored *Plaid Cymru*, describing Welsh nationalists as objectionable and trivial following investigation into whether the newspaper *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* was anti-war, but eventually decided against suppression out of the fear that nationalism would grow. Instead the secret services exploited these differences, concocting a *Welsh Nationalist Aryan World Movement* to dupe the Germans into broadcasting Welsh language propaganda in an attempt to recruit spies. Ultimately Welsh patriots dutifully fighting alongside the British was never in doubt, however the somewhat subdued Welshness present in modern commemorations may derive from this rather uncomfortable disunity between Welsh and British wartime identity.

It would be negligent to believe nationalistic fervour was an impact of the war on Wales, as to this day contentious devolution still divides the Welsh. Nevertheless it is well evidenced that the war generated more widespread discontent and resentment amongst the population to offset the excitement and British pride discussed above. The Welsh were optimistic that war would create employment, given that areas of the Welsh nation such as Dowlais had suffered 80% unemployment in the 1930’s Great Depression without government assistance, while others waited for enlistment simply to escape the mostly unpopular job of mining. Indeed 25,000 Welsh miners quickly left for the armed forces, resulting in mining becoming a reserved occupation to mitigate shortages at such a crucial time. Disgruntled by their inability to serve, these mostly patriarchal Welsh miners were dismayed to soon find their 47 hours of work earned the family less than their wives and daughters 60 hours in munitions factories such as ROF Bridgend. If not feeling altogether emasculated, many Welshmen in the coalfields came to believe they were not appreciated by the British government. There were 514 subsequent mining stoppages during war heavily involving the Welsh, mostly unofficial strikes, however despite securing a higher minimum wage they became alienated as authorities suggested they were unpatriotic. Contrary to this, these miners rather felt their efforts were essential to enable the country to keep fighting. When their sacrifices were generally not celebrated following the war, certainly less so than the soldiers who returned well fed and tanned by comparison, there was some resentment amongst home front workers that their hardship was not recognised. Given the large numbers of such workers in Wales, the impact of the war on the nation could be interpreted as one of disillusionment and separation from British authorities.

Dissatisfaction is also evidenced in memories of evacuation to Wales, suggesting participants became highly aware of their cultural differences when integration proved challenging. One source recalls evacuees from London refusing to even leave the bus due to their destination Welsh village seeming too quiet. Others complained because they had to attend chapel three times on a Sunday with their Welsh host families. An understandable concern was the language barrier confronting children evacuated to monoglot Welsh households, with one girl from Liverpool fearing her hosts were witches when she saw a cauldron heating over the fire. Such differences caused conflict in extreme cases. Rural locals were shocked by the condition and behaviour of some evacuees, considering them indecent and anxious about germs and lice being brought into the Welsh countryside from English slums. These fears almost resulted in a riot in Llanwrst, implying that these issues were more significant than petty. Indeed, even in areas including Glamorgan which received the most evacuees, they were taught separately creating a ‘them and us’ feeling of hostility against local children. Perhaps this sentiment reflected the impact of the war on the nation. Though the Welsh host families supported the war effort diligently and many bonded with their evacuees, there can be little doubt that the experience and impact of war left many others feeling frustrated and disconnected from the idea of shared Britishness.

Despite the juxtaposition of the Second World War creating a unity between Welsh people and the rest of the United Kingdom, whilst also seemingly elevating their awareness of national identity, the Welsh nation simultaneously broadened its world perspective beyond the borders of Wales and Great Britain altogether. Wales played host to more guests than just evacuees with certain communities adopting an unprecedented international wartime character, an unexpected impact which is best exemplified by Bridgend. RAF Stormy Down, an air gunnery and bombing school situated on the outskirts of the town, trained over 10,000 air crew including men from Poland, Canada and Australia. Additionally from 1943, the American 28th Infantry Division was resident in the town’s Island Farm base in preparation for the invasion of France, even receiving a visit from Supreme Commander Eisenhower. Later repurposed into a POW Camp, Island Farm held such high ranking German prisoners as field marshal von Rundstedt and SS commander Franz. The impact upon the locals was significant, as testimonies attest to young women marrying Americans, children adopting American fashion and slang and even being handed chocolate by von Rundstedt as they crowded to see him walk through the town. Bridgend’s American style milkshake shop is remembered fondly, as are former German prisoners who formed relationships with some residents after the war! Such multiculturalism was unheard of in the rural setting of Wales, in a 1940s context where travel was the preserve of the wealthy, those towns which experienced this cultural diffusion appear to have welcomed it enthusiastically. Ironically, the impact of this devastating war on these communities was to extend their horizons beyond Wales. Their experiences encouraged them to want to build a better world, which they felt Wales and even the United Kingdom could not do alone.

The Second World War is often thought of as a time when Britishness peaked. Historian John Davies argues that the war was a death blow to Welshness. A strong sense of solidarity certainly cut across gender and class in a war where everyone shared sacrifice, loss, joy, intangible propaganda and even tangible food. Yet nationalism in Wales also underwent a strengthening in the Welsh psyche, emerging from a conflict characterised by British unity with renewed awareness of what differentiated the Welsh. Although experiences and perceptions differed between urban and rural areas, battlefield and home front, all appear to have viewed their conduct in the war with immense pride in realisation that their small nation had strength and was valued. Ironically, in their most unified moment of British harmony and global interest, it could be argued that it was the impact of the Second World War which ignited the devolution of the proud Welsh nation.

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